
Cocta News

Help for Social Scientists: A New Kind of Reference Tool

The International Social Science Council, through its Committee on Conceptual and Terminological Analysis (COCTA) announces the publication of a new kind of reference work designed to help social scientists say more simply and clearly just what they have in mind.

Ordinary glossaries, like dictionaries, contain a list of words to be defined, and because they are restricted to a specialized subject field, the defined words are those with a technical meaning in that field. Such glossaries enable readers to find out what special connotations these words have – thus they are designed to help readers interpret texts, documents that have already been written.

A “conceptual glossary,” by contrast, is designed to help scholars, when writing their research reports, solve a different, though complementary, problem. Frequently they need to express an idea – sometimes generated by field research in a Third World country or by a maturing theory – that cannot be expressed very simply by any available terms. To help writers find suitable terms, therefore, and to support their efforts to introduce new ones when this is clearly desirable, a new kind of reference tool is needed. Its basic structure is the precise opposite of that found in ordinary glossaries. We refer to it as a “conceptual glossary” because its records always start, not with a word to be defined, but with a defined concept to be named. Each concept definition must then be followed by one or more of the terms that can be used for it, together with some information that will help users decide which term to select. (Technically speaking, such glossaries can be called “nomenclators” or “onomantic glossaries”, but for simplicity we will refer to them here as “conceptual glossaries.”)

Design Features

A conceptual glossary needs to establish links between the concepts it defines and the theories or research from which they have arisen. To do this, each concept record needs to contain one or more quotations from the writings where it has been used, in addition to the available (or proposed) terms for that concept. Obviously it also needs enough bibliographic information so that users can go from quoted fragments to the full context of use and operationalization of concepts, plus an alphabetical index to guide users to the defined words, since obviously concept definitions cannot themselves be arranged alphabetically but must be placed taxonomically in a suitable classification scheme.

The problems faced by social scientists as authors differ significantly from those confronted by natural scientists in at least one important respect. Natural scientists are more likely to coin and accept new technical terms to represent the concepts they discover or invent. This means that the terms already in use tend to retain their original meanings. Although one must memorize a lot of neologisms in order to understand natural science texts, what one reads is normally both

clear and succinct, provided one knows the terminology of the field.

Social Science Usage

By contrast, social scientists are reluctant to coin new terms and so they tend, instead, to re-define familiar words, arbitrarily assigning (stipulating) new meanings for them. As a result readers are often perplexed because well known words are used in strange ways. To overcome this difficulty writers typically waste a lot of precious space in order to explain and re-explain their own intentions when using key words. In the process, as often as not, they multiply the marginally distinguished senses of such words, thereby adding further to the perplexity of their readers and the growing public image of social scientists as inveterate users of impenetrable jargons.

The new “ana-semantic” (or “onomantic”) paradigm developed for use in a conceptual glossary handles this problem by offering writers a set of options to help them express their ideas as clearly and simply as possible. Whenever, in context, a familiar word can be used unequivocally, its use in a new sense may be appropriate, but when all the available terms are equivocal or clumsy, possible equivalents are suggested, even if they are neologisms. No attempt is made to “standardize” a vocabulary, or to insist on “preferred terms.” Authors retain their complete freedom of choice, and are even pressed to think of better terms than those already available, but such choices are informed by better knowledge of available options.

The Pilot Edition

A pilot edition of a conceptual glossary designed on these principles has now been published by the ISSC. The subject field chosen for this experiment is “ethnicity research,” a topic that is global in significance, especially in the Third World, and one that has attracted the interest of researchers in virtually every social science discipline. It has also become a focus of attention in the growing inter-disciplinary subject field of “ethnic studies.”

An introductory essay by the Filipino anthropologist, Eric Casino, lays out the theoretical frameworks and implicit paradigms that govern the work of those who deal with ethnicity – including nationality, race, and minority problems – from a wide variety of points of view and ideological premises. The classification scheme used in the glossary distinguishes between core concepts and those that emerge in each of the social sciences. Priority is given to a scheme that facilitates easy discovery of the point at which any given concept is offered, thereby also enabling creative scholars to find out whenever an idea that is useful in their work has not yet been reported.

Continuous Interaction

Knowing that a concept has not been reported is, of course, basic knowledge for an innovator. This knowledge permits one to explain an unreported concept and propose one or more suitable terms for it. Such proposals ordinarily take a long time to reach the attention of colleagues in the field, however.

Consequently, it is necessary for a conceptual glossary to be maintained continuously in machine-readable

form as a terminology bank (or database) that can be expanded, on demand, by the insertion of new records, as part of a continuously interactive system. Moreover, the distribution of a newsletter to users of the glossary enables them to be informed when new items are added to its vocabulary and they can, from time to time, secure new machine-readable diskettes containing the whole data-base, or new print-outs of the text. Microfiche copies may also be distributed, and it is planned that the data-base may also be consulted on-line, by remote access. By such means partners in the interactive process can continuously add their own proposals for expansion or revision of the glossary's data-base.

A Tool for Indigenization

This radically different approach is designed to overcome some of the fruitless disputations that often rage within the social sciences when key words are interpreted differently by contending factions or schools of thought. Above all, it contributes to the solution of the problem of "indigenization," how best to facilitate the emergence and more widespread use of concepts needed for research in Third World contexts. This problem has gained growing recognition as we discover that much of the vocabulary of the social sciences, because it is rooted in the experience of Western (or Northern) countries, is simply not precise enough for application in the very different cultural and social environment found in the countries of the Third World.

The methodology developed for use in conceptual glossaries is part of a long-term plan for the creation of a new kind of international conceptual encyclopedia for the social sciences. The individual volumes will be devoted to selected subject fields, containing basic essays and concept records, so that they can be produced, published, and distributed separately by research committees, special interest groups, and professional societies, according to their own needs and practices. However, a manual with detailed guidelines will be published by UNESCO, thereby permitting any interested group to submit its own conceptual glossary for inclusion in the international encyclopedia where it will be collectively indexed and made available to libraries and documentation centers. Thus users will not only have easy access to their own subject field glossaries, but also to those of other fields.

The Planning Process

The basic recommendation for an international encyclopedia designed in this way was formulated at a Conference on Conceptual and Terminological Analysis in the Social Sciences, sponsored by the ISSC/COCTA with financial assistance from UNESCO, that was held in Bielefeld, West Germany, during May 1981.* Over 75 social and information scientists from a score of countries in all world regions attended. By tapping the expertise of information scientists, it was possible to utilize their technical expertise in such fields as thesaurus design, classification, and terminology.

* See also the book review in this issue of *Int. Classif.* on this conference by Gisela Hartwig. The Proceedings of the CONTA Conference — as it was called — may be ordered from INDEKS Verlag, D-6000 Frankfurt 50, Woogstr. 36a, FRG, or from Prof. F. Riggs, Univ. of Hawaii. Price for individual social scientists DM 53,— or \$ 20.—, for libraries DM 64,80 or \$ 25.—

As a by-product of this enterprise it is anticipated that, when the vocabulary used by social scientists becomes clearer, it will be easier to index their writings and to retrieve them through established library and information systems. At the same time the usefulness (indigenosity) of such systems in the Third World will also be enhanced.

To work out the details of the plan, the ISSC sponsored a Round Table that was held in Caracas, Venezuela, in June 1983, at which, again, information and social scientists, more than half of whom came from the Third World, spent a week framing specific recommendations for the encyclopedia as a whole, and more specifically for the pilot project for "ethnicity research."

Credit must also be given to UNESCO for having convened, in 1977, a round table on conceptual problems in the social sciences, and for having authorized an international ad hoc group, chaired by Professor Fred W. Riggs of the University of Hawaii, to carry out a preliminary study focused on the meanings of "development." The results of this committee's studies and deliberations are reported in the INTERCONCEPT REPORT: A NEW PARADIGM FOR SOLVING THE TERMINOLOGY PROBLEMS OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES, published by UNESCO in its series of Reports and Papers in the Social Sciences, no. 47, Paris, 1983. This report was available to participants in the Bielefeld conference, which has been recommended at the UNESCO/INTERCONCEPT Committee's meeting in Budapest in 1979.

To Get Started

Copies of the pilot conceptual glossary for ETHNICITY RESEARCH can be secured, for U.S. \$ 25.00, from the chairman of the ISSC/INTERCOCTA committee: Professor Fred W. Riggs, Department of Political Science, University of Hawaii, 2424 Maile Way, Honolulu, Hawaii 96822, U.S.A. Recipients of the Glossary will be placed on a mailing list to receive the up-dating INTERCOCTA Newsletters. Riggs has also prepared a document that explains in greater detail the rationale and history of the INTERCOCTA project, with the title: HELP FOR SOCIAL SCIENTISTS: A NEW KIND OF REFERENCE PROCESS. It will soon be published by UNESCO, in English, French, and Spanish versions. Anyone wishing to receive a copy should write to the Division for Social and Economic Sciences at UNESCO, 7, place de Fontenoy, 75700 Paris. Copies of the INTERCOCTA REPORT may also be requested.

Several audiences for this material are visualized. First, of course, those who have a substantive interest in the study of ethnicity — or of nationalism, of race relations, of minority problems, etc. — will want to participate in the use and further development of the INTERCOCTA glossary for research on ethnicity. However, in addition, anyone interested in the general problem of how to improve the effectiveness of social scientists as writers by helping them refine the concepts and terms they use in their discourse will want to learn more about the long-term INTERCOCTA process.

Finally, in due course, it is anticipated that various research committees and interest groups belonging to international social science associations will want to start planning conceptual (INTERCOCTA) glossaries in their own fields of expertise. When they reach that stage, a technical manual will be available to guide them and persons with experience and expertise in this kinds of work may also be used as consultants. Meanwhile a second conceptual glossary for ethnicity research, in Russian, is being planned at the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R., under a UNESCO-sponsored contract with the ISSC. A new INTERCOCTA glossary in Spanish, for Development Studies, has also been launched at the Central University in Venezuela, through CENDES, its center for development studies. It is also sponsored by UNESCO through an ISSC contract. The process, therefore, has started. A growing network of interested and enthusiastic participants now needs to be encouraged.

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